



SILEVETHIEL

The Vaelinel Trilogy

Book One



ANDI O'CONNOR



IREWEN'S BARE FEET SLAPPED AGAINST THE COLD stone floor as she ran down the hallway. The news of her father's murder during the night pierced her heart like a knife.

She approached the king's bedchamber, ignoring the guards' mournful expressions. She'd seen many heinous injuries during the few times she had helped in the infirmary, but nothing prepared her for the grotesque scene that met her eyes when she burst into the room.

Her royal blue skirts fell still about her as she stared at her father's mutilated body. Stabbed more times than she cared to tally, his torso was nothing but a chaotic mass of ripped flesh and tissue. Large amounts of blood had already congealed into dark sticky pools among the tattered remnants of his light green sleep shirt. The king's heart, torn from his chest, lay draped across his forehead. Dried rivers of blood trailed into his unseeing gray eyes.

This can't be happening!

Her hands trembling at her sides, she gaped at the scene before her in horrified disbelief. Closing her eyes, she willed herself to wake from the hideous dream. She struggled to push the horrid image of the king's body from her mind, but it continued to hover behind her eyelids like a demon from a nightmare. The fetid smell of death permeated her nostrils; wincing, she took a deep breath and opened her eyes. It was not a dream. It was real.

A strong arm suddenly wrapped itself around her shoulders. Unaware of the man's identity, she nevertheless allowed herself to be pulled into the sanctuary of his muscular arms as they circled her slender waist in a comforting embrace. She buried her face in his chest, her warm tears soaking his fine silk tunic. Overcome by the brutal finality of her father's murder, her choked sobs drove away the penetrating silence enveloping them both.

"Forgive me, Irewen." Her cousin Elthad's rich sympathetic voice infiltrated the dense haze obscuring her senses. "You should not have been subjected to such an appalling scene. Come to the sitting room and join me in a drink. It will calm your nerves and aid in purging this distressing image from your memory."

She did not resist as Elthad gently escorted her from the king's bedchamber. Her pale

blue eyes stared into nothingness as he slowly guided her through the expansive castle. Her spent tears glistened on her fair cheeks like tiny droplets of morning dew clinging to the delicate white petals of a rose.

She took no notice of her surroundings when they entered the lavish sitting room. Elthad led her to a settee where she perched uncomfortably on the edge of the velvet cushion, her skirts ballooning around her. A servant poured the wine. The clear ringing of crystal on crystal echoed off the stone walls, an unwelcome merriment invading her sorrow.

“Have a drink, my lady,” Elthad said, handing her a goblet from the tray.

She looked at the crystal wineglass uneasily; the dark liquid within matched the intense redness of her father’s pooled blood.

Elthad sat next to her and held the goblet to her pale lips. “Please, Irewen,” he pleaded. “At least take a sip. Your father’s murder has come as a tremendous shock. The wine will help your mind relax.”

She didn’t protest when Elthad carefully tilted the goblet to her lips. The velvety liquid trickled into her mouth and rolled against her tongue. She savored the strong earthy tones of the wine and relished the vintage as it slid down her throat, coating her insides with its rich, comforting warmth.

She took another sip, and her senses began to clear, the heavy fog rolling aside in her mind. Like the sun banishing rainclouds after a storm, the wine freed her from her daze. She could think clearly for the first time since bursting into the room housing her father’s mutilated corpse.

Tucking a stray raven curl behind her ear, she peered closely at Elthad, now fully aware of her cousin’s presence. His light brown hair framed his face in soft waves, falling just below his strong jawline. His rugged features, deeply tanned from the countless hours spent outdoors, displayed prominent battle scars covered by day-old stubble. Gazing intently at her through thick tawny eyelashes, his warm amber eyes offered what little comfort they could. He waited patiently for her to speak on the horrors plaguing her mind.

“Who?” she asked, her voice cracking like thin ice covering a pond. “Why?”

Elthad shook his head, appearing burdened by weariness and sorrow. “I do not know, my lady. I have questioned your father’s personal servants, as well as the guards and sentries who were on duty throughout the night, but I have not received any beneficial information. No one seems to have heard or seen anything out of the ordinary. I have not even ascertained if the murderer is still within the walls of the city.”

Fresh tears rolled down her cheeks. “Irewen,” Elthad said softly, taking hold of her hands, “until the murderer is discovered and we are able to establish his motives, your life is in danger. It is no longer safe for you to remain in Dürgeld or anywhere else in Dargon. You must leave. Travel north into Mistwood. Seek refuge with the Wood Elves.”

“No, Elthad. My duty lies here.”

“My lady, the people of Dargon cannot risk you suffering the same fate as your father. Although we have not had any recent dealings with the Wood Elves, Mistwood remains one of our most powerful allies. Lord Brandir will provide you with his protection until we have

captured your father's assassin. Once I am assured the city is safe, you will return to Dürgeld and take your rightful place as queen.”

Tense minutes passed while she considered her cousin's words. She was an only child. The safety of the kingdom of Dargon was now her responsibility. She didn't want to flee, yet Elthad had a reason for his concern. Until the murderer was found, she would live in a constant state of fear and trepidation. She knew in her heart that she would be of no use to her people until her father's assassin was captured.

“Very well, Elthad,” she finally conceded, seeing the worried tension disappear from his face as he let go of her hands. “I will do as you wish.”

“Preparations for your departure will begin at once,” he said. “I'll send our fastest rider to the elven city of Silverden to inform Lord Brandir of the situation. Five of my best men will accompany you as your personal escort. You must remain on your guard, especially while traveling through the vast farmlands to our north. There are few places that will provide protection against unwanted eyes.

Pausing to sip his wine, Elthad scrutinized her features. “Secrecy and haste are your best defenses,” he continued gravely. “Your long, black hair and fair skin are quite distinguishing characteristics, especially among those native of Dargon. Until you pass the southern border of Mistwood, keep your hair pinned beneath a head scarf. Wear poorer clothing, and conceal as much of your face and arms as possible. Let my men do the talking. You are to speak to no one. We cannot risk someone recognizing you, especially while you remain within the city walls.

“Whatever you do, you must trust my men explicitly. They will recognize signs of danger that you will not. Darkness is this maniac's ally. You must be well outside the walls of the city before sundown. With luck, your movements will go unnoticed.”

She answered her cousin with an almost imperceptible nod. Letting her gaze fall to her hands resting delicately in her lap, she mulled over Elthad's words. The entire situation felt totally surreal. She wondered if she would ever believe it to be anything but a nightmare.

Despite what reasoning told her, she didn't want to leave. She felt comfortable in Dürgeld. It was familiar to her. It was home. In the twenty years of her life, she'd never ventured outside the stone borders of the city. She rarely even stepped foot beyond the castle grounds. She knew nothing of what the rest of the world looked like aside from what she read in books or learned from her father.

Even though she didn't want to admit it, her cousin's argument made sense. Anyone else would think she was asinine for wanting to remain in the vicinity of an assassin rather than seeking safety, but it was true. Like a baby bird preparing to fly for the first time, she was scared to venture from the security of her nest. But just like the bird, she had no choice. Even though she outranked Elthad, he had made his decision. She knew him well. He would hound her until she agreed to leave.

Like a thief in the night, she would flee to Silverden, abandoning her duties to her father and her people.

. . .

Irewen did her best to suppress a shiver. She rolled to her side and pulled the heavy wool cloak tighter against her body in a feeble attempt to keep out the winter chill. The campfire had begun to die long ago; she could hear the faint sizzle of the last remaining embers clinging desperately to life.

Praying for the welcome release of sleep, she let out a faint sigh as she closed her eyes. Sorrow still wrapped her in its dark arms; she'd said little over the journey, and in response, the soldiers had left her in peace with only her terrifying memories for company.

The constant monotony, frigid temperatures, and barren surroundings of the past nine days were more than her shattered heart could bear. She looked upon the remainder of the excursion with dread. Though they'd crossed the southwestern border of Mistwood before sunset, it was at least another five days' ride before they reached the gates of Silverden. Another soft sigh escaped her lips. She feared her anguish would not be lessened, even in the jovial company of the elves.

Faint snoring drifted over the camp, and she let her thoughts wander to the five soldiers escorting her to Silverden. Like her, they had spent most of the journey in silence, their hushed voices occasionally wafting through the crisp winter air. She recognized two of the men from the time she'd spent with her father in court, but she had been unable to identify the remaining three.

She wasn't surprised. Elthad had first alerted the king of the increased threat from the southern country of Thaurod nearly two years ago. After reporting that a number of small raiding parties had been sighted in the southeastern Lynden Forest, Elthad had persuaded the king to heighten the security across the wide expanse of Dargon's southern border. Patrols were deployed in order to aid the rural villages dotting the countryside. Elthad had insisted on leading them himself, occasionally sending word to the king of what little progress was being made. Nothing could really be done until the motive for Thaurod's attacks could be determined.

Most of Dargon was open, flat land. Unlike the northern regions of the country which were vast farmlands, the rocky, claylike soil in the south was not suitable for cultivation. Save for scattered towns that made their living from fishing in the Gretchnel Lake or hunting in the Lynden Forest, southern Dargon was devoid of natural resources and largely uninhabited. There was nothing stopping Thaurod's armies from marching to the gates of Dürgeld. Yet, they weren't. What interest could they possibly have in the lands they were raiding? It was a question she had posed to her father on numerous occasions. Each time, it had been downplayed by Elthad and dismissed by the king.

Nevertheless, her uneasiness persisted. Something wasn't right. While Dargon's relationship with Thaurod had never been wonderfully friendly, it was amiable enough, certainly since the time her grandfather had been king. During his rule, an agreement was made between the two countries that served them both quite well.

Dargon was the larger and more fertile of the two kingdoms. The great walled city of

Dürgeld was home to the best craftsmen among the four human nations in Vaelinel. On the other hand, Thaurod had amassed an impressive amount of wealth by mining metals and gemstones from the expansive twin mountain chains in the southwest. Her armies, home to some of humankind's finest warriors, were large in number and strength, but their weapons and gear were subpar. Hoarded in grand rooms of the castle, the country's wealth was meaningless. In order to groom an army that was unstoppable, the gold and jewels needed to be traded or sold.

King Marlen Donriél, Irewen's grandfather, recognized the neighboring kingdom's predicament and struck a trade agreement with then King Trillard of Thaurod. In return for sending shipments of the metal and jewels to Dargon's crafters, the generals and captains of Thaurod's armies would receive their choice of weapons and armor for themselves, and the same would be commissioned for their men at a much reduced price.

But Marlen was not a foolish man. Dargon was getting nothing out of the deal other than experience for its crafters and a pittance of tax from the low commission. As a result, he pushed for his merchants to be granted exclusive rights to purchase Thaurod's metals and jewels in order to be used and sold as the crafters saw fit. King Trillard had been reluctant to agree, but seeing no other way to get what he wanted for his armies, the deal was made.

Since then, the trading had continued with no qualms from either side. As it stood, there was no reason for Thaurod's king to send raiding parties into Dargon whose armies were now equal, if not superior to Thaurod's. If the raids were to lead to war, Thaurod stood to lose a great deal.

Irewen shrugged. None of it made any sense.

She let her mind wander to her cousin. She suddenly realized that the morning of her father's death was the first time she'd seen Elthad in over six months. He had returned from a patrol the previous evening. As always, he'd reported straight to the king and the two men had spent long hours alone in her father's study discussing the consequences of Thaurod's continued pressure. She suspected that Elthad had enjoyed only an hour or two of sleep before being awakened with the news of his uncle's murder.

She stretched her cramped legs before returning to the fetal position beneath her cloak. *What a thing to return home to. It is no wonder why he looked so weary and haggard.*

She found herself wondering when she would be able to see her cousin again when the muddled sound of footsteps pulled her from her reflections.

"Lady Irewen?"

The guard's cautious whisper sounded like thunder in her ear. She felt a tentative hand on her shoulder and rolled over to find herself staring into the concerned eyes of Sir Leif. She sat up, wrapping the cloak around her shoulders.

"I apologize for disturbing you, my lady," he said, "but I did not want to speak to you before I was certain the others were asleep. There is something I feel you should know."

She nodded her head and waited silently for him to continue.

"Neither Shon nor myself have ever seen the other three men assigned to this mission. I questioned Prince Elthad before we departed, and he informed me that because of

the mounting threat of Thaurod, he was given permission as Captain to swear men into the royal service without the king's approval. I was not aware of any such decree, but knowing his fractious temper, I did not press the matter further.

“Nevertheless, I am troubled by these strangers. Though they have been careful to disguise it beneath their woolen over-garments, they are wearing non-regulation leathers. The weapons they carry are of strange make and design and are not permitted for use by soldiers of the royal guard. They continually exchange furtive glances, and on numerous occasions, both Shon and I have heard them whispering to one another when they believed everyone else to be asleep or too preoccupied to notice.

“My lady, I do not believe these men are fully enlisted soldiers of the royal guard, nor do I believe their intentions are pure. I have felt a growing sense of trepidation build in my heart since the beginning of the journey. Shon and I are sworn to protect you, but I ask you to remain cautious. The king's assassin was still at large when we departed. Take great care. Do not find yourself alone with our other three companions.”

Her eyes widened in shocked disbelief, the soft moonlight reflecting brilliantly off of her pure blue irises. “Are you suggesting that my cousin...” She couldn’t bring herself to utter the words.

“I am not suggesting anything, my lady,” he replied. “I am merely saying that until you are safely within the walls of Silverden and have the protection of the elves, you should remain on your guard. Do not become too comfortable with your surroundings. Do not allow the grief of your father's death and the monotony of the journey to cloud your judgment. Greed can taint even the most noble. Trust no one but yourself.”

One of the other men stirred, and Leif deftly returned to his belongings without another word. Irewen trembled beneath her woolen cloak, his warnings echoing in her mind. She did not want to believe that Elthad could have sent the strangers to do her harm, but reason tugged at her heart. If she hadn’t been so heavily burdened by her sorrow, she would have noticed the men’s unusual gear. She would have listened more carefully to their hushed conversations and scrutinized their actions. She would not have mistaken her sense of uneasiness from their penetrating stares for loneliness and misery.

But what can I do? The question burst through her mind like lightning. *I am not a warrior. I have no weapons or means of defense. Should Leif and Shon fall, I will die.*

She considered sneaking away before the others woke and continuing on foot, but immediately dismissed the idea. The three strangers had made certain that they carried all of the provisions. She had no experience in foraging and had no weapons or skills to hunt. More importantly, the men had already proved their expertise in tracking. She would not get far before she was discovered.

No, she thought as she huddled beside a fallen log, hoping it would help to shield her from the penetrating wind. *I can do nothing but remain vigilant and pray that Leif's concern is for naught.*

A yawn suddenly escaped her lips as the bulky woolen cloak finally seemed to provide her with some warmth. Her eyelids grew heavy with exhaustion and weariness.

Despite her anxiety and desire to stay alert, she could no longer battle her fatigue, and she slowly drifted into a restless and disturbed sleep.

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It seemed like only minutes had passed when frenzied shouting pulled Irewen from her dreams. Annoyed at the disturbance and only half awake, she groaned, then shifted on the hard ground, turning her body away from the noise.

She found herself staring directly into Shon's lifeless blue eyes.

The last traces of sleep instantly vanished from her body. She screamed and jumped to her feet, then immediately froze in her tracks. Fear gripped her as she surveyed the alarming scene before her.

How could I have slept through this?

Her agitation grew when she noticed the headless corpse lying only feet from Shon. Fresh blood poured onto the frozen ground, shimmering in the soft morning light. Reminded of the thick crimson liquid pooled on her father's body, she shuddered involuntarily.

The clanging of metal on metal pulled her from the grisly memory. She turned her attention to the remaining three men still locked in combat. She gasped as Leif expertly dodged an attack. Caught off balance from the power of the royal soldier's swing, his attacker staggered to the side. Leif took the opportunity to thrust his sword through the traitor's back. The victim clutched his chest when the sword was withdrawn. He met Irewen's gaze for an instant, then collapsed on the ground with a dull thud.

She watched with morbid fascination as Leif pivoted to face the man rushing at him from behind. Leif turned just in time to block the violent overhead strike, his muscles shaking from the intensity of the blow. Despite his swift action, it was clear that he was beginning to tire. He wavered against the brute strength of the man, whose unyielding pressure from above caused Leif's blade to slowly inch closer to his face.

"Run, my lady!" Leif shouted over his shoulder before gathering his remaining strength and circling his blade clockwise. Forcing his assailant's sword arm to the right allowed him a few seconds of reprieve while the stranger regrouped.

"Run!" he repeated, deflecting an attack directed towards his midsection.

Irewen didn't need Leif's frantic warnings to know she should flee, but she couldn't move; her body was paralyzed. The world seemed to close in around her. She stood riveted to the ground, unable to take her eyes off the two men locked in their deadly dance. Their sword blades flashed brilliantly in the early morning sunlight, reminding her of Elthad. Was it his dagger that stabbed the king, or did it belong to one of his hired men? When her father's last breath escaped his lips, did he know his nephew was a traitor?

The weight of Elthad's betrayal shattered her heart with the force of a hammer smashing glass.

Suddenly, time seemed to stand still. The stranger's sword slashed Leif's side, and the royal soldier fell to his knees. Irewen watched in horror as the assassin sliced through Leif's

neck with one swift and powerful swing. Leif's head plunged to the ground and rolled towards her, leaving a fresh trail of blood in the dirt. His body hovered eerily for a few seconds, then slowly tumbled forward.

The small campsite plunged into a deafening silence. Elthad's hired man paused to catch his breath, slowly turning to face the young princess. She looked into his blue eyes - icy pools of hatred - and abruptly felt control return to her body. Instinctively, she threw off her cloak and bolted into the surrounding forest. She didn't know if she was running in the correct direction, nor did she care. Her only thought was to put as much distance as possible between her and the odious man.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd run. Already, she felt her muscles tiring. She knew her pursuer had spent a good deal of his energy during the fight, but he was a warrior. There was no question that his stamina and strength were superior to hers.

She glanced at her austere surroundings and silently cursed the mid-winter landscape. Aside from a few scattered evergreen trees, this section of the forest was barren. There was nowhere for her to hide. She felt the man's eyes boring into her back and knew her life was forfeit. Without glancing behind, she willed her feet to move faster.

A horrendous pain suddenly erupted from her upper back. She cried out in agony and stumbled forward, then plummeted heavily to her knees. Another arrow penetrated the thin leather armour she wore beneath her long woolen tunic. The force of the blow violently launched her body forward. She landed heavily on the frozen ground, knocking the breath from her lungs.

Help me! Father! Please...

Her plea resounded uselessly through her head. She braced herself for the onslaught of a third arrow, but it never came.

Bastard! Finish me!

Irewen's lungs felt like they were drowning in a pool of fire; each gasp for breath brought a grimace to her face. With her vision blurring from the pain, she cursed herself for listening to her handmaiden. Had she not worn the leather, her suffering would have already ended.

Guilt immediately consumed her heart as she considered the agony her father had been forced to endure. How long had it taken for death to free him? Had he been alive when his heart was wrenched from his chest?

A violent spasm wracked her slender body. In its wake, her consciousness began to dim. She convulsed once more, then her body stilled and she plummeted into darkness.